CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
SPEECH TO RESOURCES FOR THE FUTURE
June 23, 2005

It's a pleasure to be with you this afternoon. Indeed, it's a special pleasure because the last time I was supposed to appear I was instead recuperating from triple bypass surgery. So it's really a pleasure to be anywhere.

And the delay got us past the election cycle, so perhaps we can all be a little less guarded in our comments today than would have been the case last fall.

I guess the title for my talk today might be, "The State of the Political Environment" or maybe more accurately, "The State of the Environment, Politically." Like other State of the Environment reports mine could use more and better data and less impressionistic conclusions. But I'm going to have at it, anyway.

So what is my overall assessment of the state of the political environment? It won't surprise anyone, I think, if I give a moderate answer: the state is worse than what I would like and not so dire as some would suggest.

Listening to some commentators on the left these days about environmental politics reminds me of the opening of Woody Allen's great essay, "My Address to the Graduates." He opens, "Today, we are at a crossroads. One road leads to hopelessness and despair. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we choose wisely."

I just can't look through that dark a glass. But all is not well, either. Some on the right act as if we have infinite resources, and we have been granted unlimited license to exploit the earth for our immediate pleasure.

They would be wise to recall another quip in the Woody Allen essay. That's the one where he writes, "And what do we mean when we say that man is mortal? Obviously, it isn't a compliment."

But let's get down to specifics, and let me start with some of the bad news first.

I should preface this by saying that the environmental issues I think are most salient for the future of our nation and our planet involve three related matters – energy use, land and water use, and global climate change.

There are many issues that capture the headlines, often deservedly – mercury emissions are an example – but in terms of the things that will really determine our future, I come back to energy, land and climate. And with the exception of climate, the issues are woefully undercovered by the media.

Energy – the issue with the most immediate impact and the one that should stir national interests the most – is the most undercovered of all. Individual political fights related to the Energy Bill may get some ink, but the bill as a whole does not.

And that's a shame. The public should be up in arms about what's in and what's not in the Energy Bill – particularly, the House version, which I've voted against for three Congresses now.

I can only repeat what I said about the bill on the House floor, "The bill will do little if anything to reduce our dependence on foreign oil, and it will do nothing to reduce energy prices. But it will increase the deficit, weaken our economy, compromise our national security and endanger our environment." Not exactly a "win-win."

This is especially unfortunate because we desperately need an energy policy. Our growing dependence on foreign oil puts us at the mercy of unstable and unfriendly foreign

regimes. It gives terrorists additional targets and puts money in their hands. It weakens the dollar by worsening the balance of trade. It pumps money out of the domestic economy and into the hands of those who wish us ill. In short, our oil dependence represents a significant and growing threat to our national security.

And those are the issues before one even gets to environmental concerns.

Now I should add that this is not exactly a new problem. It's not as if our nation has been distinguished through most of its history by its sensible and farsighted energy policies. We're a big country and we like to live big – I drive an SUV myself – and we've repeatedly ignored energy issues until they've reached crisis proportions.

So we're not at some uniquely depressing historical moment in energy policy. But we are proving what happens when you fail to learn from the past.

And to me, our biggest failure in this area is our unwillingness to raise Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards. We know they work because they've worked before, and we know how to make them work better than they did in the 1970s. The report that should serve as the Bible on this issue was written by a National Academy of Sciences panel that was headed by RFF's own Paul Portney.

As part of this year's energy debate, I offered an amendment with Congressman Ed Markey and others to raise the combined CAFE standard for all cars and light trucks to 33 miles per gallon by 2015. We based that figure on what the Academy study said was technically and economically feasible. And that one move would reduce oil consumption in the U.S. by two million barrels per day by 2020.

For context, I would remind everybody that the U.S. is importing about 14 million barrels of oil every day. Cars and light trucks consume 9 million barrels of oil every day. And we've been losing ground in fuel economy. We use more gas to drive a mile today than we did 20 years ago.

Opponents of the amendment try to argue against it on safety grounds. But this is wearing awfully thin. The National Academy of Sciences said that fuel economy can be increased "without degradation of safety."

A representative of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers confirmed at a Science Committee hearing this past winter that CAFE increases could be achieved without compromising safety.

So, to me, it's sad and distressing and foolhardy that we aren't going to impose the kind of standards that I believe, based on expert opinion, are feasible. But there are positive signs as well.

We got more votes this time around for raising CAFE standards than we ever have before. That was counter-intuitive to those who see everything going in the wrong direction; indeed, many environmentalists tried to talk me out of bringing the issue to a vote.

But we got 10 percent more votes than we did in the 107th Congress, and we got more Republican votes than we did in the last Congress, despite the more conservative cast of the party.

And we also had new allies this time around. Prompted by national security concerns, conservatives from past Administrations and corporate executives have signed on to the notion that we need to take genuine action to reduce oil consumption. These groups did not take a stand on our specific proposal, but they contributed to the drumbeat for action.

Now these positive signs won't mean a darn thing if we fail to take action until it's too late. But they matter because they counter the self-fulfilling prophecy that it's all downhill from

here – that the public has turned its back on environmental issues, and the political class is, if anything, ahead of them in doing so.

I can't emphasize that enough. I'm not suggesting that we can all somehow rest on our wilting laurels, or that the environmental movement doesn't have to make some changes. I'm just unwilling to write the obituary on environmentalism.

The environmental movement does have some tasks ahead of it, like doing more to reach out to friendly Republicans, and figuring out a way to build from successful state actions on issues like climate change, to a national consensus.

But this notion that we're at the end of environmental history, or that a fundamental shift in the environmental movement is needed (particularly a lurch to the left as some have suggested), seems to me a self-defeating and selective reading of the evidence.

It's very much akin to buying into the effort by the right to attribute President Bush's victory in November to divisive social issues. That sounded credible until folks looked at the hard data and came up with a much more convincing explanation – that the deciding issue of the campaign was the war on terrorism.

Now that doesn't mean that social issues aren't looming larger on the political landscape or that they don't matter or that they don't excite a sizable number of voters.

But it does mean that you don't have to cater to one particular element of the right to win elections. And the same is true with the environment. Things are not the same as they were at the high tide of the environmental movement, but we haven't seen the kind of sea change that the movement's detractors would like everyone to perceive.

Here's another example – the vote on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. I think it's tragic that we are on the brink of reversing 50 years of protecting ANWR, especially when we're not taking that step as part of a balanced energy policy. But look at the vote. Not exactly a rout.

In the Senate, opening ANWR prevailed by the narrowest of margins, and in the House, 15 Republicans voted against a budget bill – generally a party-line vote – many of them because of ANWR. And the outcome might have been different if seven Democrats hadn't been missing in action.

Moreover, those wanting to open ANWR framed many of their arguments in environmental terms – they argued that the amount of land affected would be small, that new drilling technologies will be less intrusive, that some studies show that the caribou will be just fine.

Why bother making those claims – unconvincing ones to me – if you don't think that environmentalism has some political salience?

Now I'm not trying to be a Pollyanna. A close vote does nothing to protect an acre of land or a herd of caribou. But a close vote can lead to a different strategy and can portend a different future than being overwhelmed does.

The climate story is very much the same. One doesn't look to the House to determine where the climate issue is trending. The House may be the ultimate lagging indicator on climate; it probably has the highest population density of climate skeptics of any spot on the entire planet.

But the general direction of the debate in Washington and nationwide is toward recognizing climate change as a serious challenge. And that will inexorably lead to action. Whether it does so in time to make a difference remains to be seen.

Look at the recent Senate votes. I view the Hagel and Bingaman amendments as a victory. It put the Senate on record, once again, and by a substantial margin, in seeing climate as

an issue that ought to be addressed. As I think everyone here knows, I prefer the McCain-Lieberman approach, but any sign of progress is welcome.

I should say as an aside that I haven't looked at the new version of McCain-Lieberman in any depth, but I don't see anything inherently wrong with acknowledging that nuclear energy will have to be part of any strategy to address climate change. More and more people who give priority to environmental concerns are acknowledging that.

Yes, nuclear energy raises serious issues – our Energy Subcommittee had a hearing on nuclear waste just last week – but so does just about every other alternative.

I view the Administration stance as a positive indicator on climate change, as well. Yes, I would prefer a much stronger approach on climate change than the one the Administration has been willing to pursue. But the Administration has not strayed into the camp of climate deniers.

Even the controversial edits to government documents that have made the news lately related to tone; the changes did not put the Administration in the position of denying the scientific consensus or the need for some action, however limited.

The Administration continues to be guided, or at least hemmed in by the report of the National Academy of Sciences on climate change that the President requested early in his term.

The centrality of that Academy report points, I think, to the strategy that moderates need to follow, perhaps I should say continue to follow. We need to keep looking for the facts, for the best and latest scientific conclusions, wherever they may lead us.

Scientists are rarely unified; science rarely draws conclusions with absolute certainty, but we need to be guided by the scientific consensus, and we need to educate the public about that consensus.

Some of my colleagues on the right have drawn an odd conclusion from the history of science. They argue, in effect, that because the scientific consensus has sometimes turned out to be incorrect or incomplete – all those "paradigm shifts" to use the classic term – that the outlyer at any given point must always be right. This is a dangerous logical and historical fallacy, and perhaps it shows why a liberal arts education still has much to contribute in our technological age.

But we do need to be guided by scientific consensus and then move on from there. Science won't point us to a single approach to addressing climate change – there are many policy choices that need to be made – but it should be a basis on which we evaluate our options.

So as we move forward, I am concerned, but not disheartened. The moderate approach, I think, is still the way to move ahead on environmental issues. That means getting the best science, arguing the facts, and doing the hard work of cobbling together practical solutions rather than retreating to ideological corners.

For most of American history, environmental progress has come slowly. Viewing the consensus of the early 1970s as typical may lead us astray. It took decades before everyone acknowledged that car exhaust contributed to smog and another couple of decades before anything much was done about it.

Reasonable environmental approaches will win out over time if we stick to our principles and our work. That's what I intend to do.

Thank you.